

NATIONAL SECURITY—WORDS, WEAPONS OR BOTH

by

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STI NOTES AND COMMENTS

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It is hardly news that amounts budgeted for America's defense have steadily declined over the past four years in both dollar outlays and share of the federal budget. And it is hardly less newsworthy that words in the form of communiques, white papers, policy statements, summaries, news conferences, treaties, and position papers, have dramatically increased.

Defense expenditures fell from \$291 billion in FY 1993 to \$265 billion in FY 1996, an annual decrease of approximately 3 percent. In the same period, military personnel decreased by about 132,000. On the other hand, the State Department's budget increased by \$100 million over the same time period although it had 1,900 fewer employees. And while there are no statistics available with respect to the increase in word output from the State Department, based on the number of daily news releases describing one diplomatic activity or another, it seems fair to conclude that the 3 percent decrease in defense spending is at least matched by a 3 percent increase in U.S. diplomatic word output. It would seem we have been substituting words for weapons. The question is whether this is a good tradeoff. Evidently Congress had some concerns. In 1996 it provided \$7 billion more in defense spending than requested by President Clinton.

The conventional justification for a decrease in defense spending is that the Cold War between the West and Soviet Union is over, hence the threat to America's national security is correspondingly diminished. While the part about the Cold War being over is obviously correct, it is the second part of the rationale that is troubling. Argued here is that the world is a far more dangerous place than it was 15 years ago. In this respect:

*An approximate military balance between the West and the Soviet Union existed. And while a major conflict could escalate and spread into a global nuclear war at a cost in lives and treasure beyond calculation, such a possibility was understood by both sides and acted as a restraint or military adventurism.

*Non- Soviet Union threats to the United States were essentially terrorists acts. While costly in lives and property, these attacks were still random with no government willing to acknowledge sponsorship. Moreover, American intelligence agencies were generally successful in thwarting such attacks or bringing the perpetrators to justice.

*While there were a number of countries in 1982 with the potential to openly challenge United States military power on a regional basis, these by and large were potential, not existing threats.

In 1997 it is another matter. The goal of smaller, essentially hostile countries such as Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Libya, and Syria is to develop and deploy nuclear and/or chemical-biological weapons. Our goal is to stop them. Both they and we have had some successes. Their success is that their programs are still on-going. Our success is that in some instances, through bribery or sanctions (words) we have slowed their development. We bribed North Korea to forgo developing nuclear weapons but our payoff is far from certain.

Fifteen years ago the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) was recognized as a potential military superpower. In 1997 “actual” is quite close to replacing “potential.” China has the world’s largest active duty military force (2,900,000) with 1.2 million in reserve. It has nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles. Its armor and military aircraft are among the world’s largest, and it is investing heavily in its naval forces with the goal of power projection. No combination of East Asian nations come even close to matching the PRC’s overall military capability. More important is that China has used and will use the threat of its military power to forward geopolitical objectives. The American response to keeping the dragon at bay has been words-trade preferences, most favored nation trade status, summits, and policy statements critical of China’s denial of basic human rights.

Many respected analysts, however, deny superpower status to the PRC. After citing America’s technological superiority in weaponry, they argue that China’s military capability is not global encompassing, that is, it could not simultaneously fight and win two major regional conflicts far from its borders. (U.S. defense planning rests on being able to fight and win two major regional conflicts simultaneously) The fallacy in this reasoning is that any future U.S. - PRC conflict will not be contested half a world away but rather in Asia and Asian waters. In this scenario, considering China anything less than a superpower is not only irresponsible but reckless in the extreme.

And then there is Russia. Admittedly not the Soviet Union of old, but a country nonetheless that still has a latent capability of returning to military superpower status. But before citing Russia’s present difficulties as a reason for complacency-its many economic problems, political instability, a growing population unrest, and the West pushing to expand NATO eastward--note should be taken that a wounded Russian bear is far less predictable than a healthy one.

If it is granted that the world is, indeed, a dangerous place in 1997, is there any historical wisdom to draw on. Actually, there is. President Theodore Roosevelt is credited with urging a policy of “speak softly but carry a big stick.” Freely translated it means less words and more military capability. The opposite would be to speak often (many words) and carry a small stick. Equally important--it is not entirely a question of more or less military capability but of a willingness to use it. Precisely applied in time and place, a small capability goes a long way. Few would disagree that Hitler could have been defanged in the mid 1930s by a judicious application

of limited force by Great Britain and France. Instead, words were substituted for action and words failed. Does all this mean that applying military power is always preferable to diplomacy? Hardly. What it does mean is that words alone can never be an effective substitute for military capability and a willingness to use it.

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